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Hussein Hopes to Bolster Image

Jordan's King Hussein had two targets in mind on his recent visit to the United States: the Reagan administration and the American people.

More than the military and economic aid he was hoping Congress will approve, the monarch wanted to gain stature among politicians and the public as the indispensable leader who will, with White House encouragement, be the peace-maker for the chaotic Middle East region. Considering that his rival power brokers include Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini and Syrian President Hafez Assad, this is a tall order for the Jordanian king.

Specifically, what Hussein wants the Reagan administration to do—and he deserves high marks for audacity, if nothing else—is to sit down and negotiate face-to-face with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

In this admittedly faint hope, he has the enthusiastic backing of "Arabists" in the State Department, though not of Secretary of State George P. Shultz or anyone else in the Reagan administration who worries about the political repercussions of upsetting Israel's friends in this country.

Our associate Lucette Lagnado has talked with State Department insiders on both sides of the issue. Here's how they view the situation and Hussein's latest initiative:

■ The PLO's presence in Jordan, just 15 years after Hussein unceremoniously booted them out during Black September, has been little short of

amazing. PLO leader Yasir Arafat is a welcome visitor to the royal palace in Amman. There are several PLO offices operating openly in the capital.

Although, as one intelligence analyst observed drily, "You don't hug a bear," Hussein evidently has assessed the risk posed by Arafat and decided to embrace him. For all his humiliation in Lebanon three years ago, Arafat still has influence in the Arab world. And Hussein can benefit from this.

■ If Hussein can persuade the White House to negotiate with the PLO, he will become a hero to other Arab leaders. Within the State Department, our sources say, Hussein's pitch is being promoted most fervently by Richard Murphy, assistant secretary for the Near East. So far he hasn't dented Shultz's reluctance to deal with the PLO, but Murphy keeps trying.

■ Hussein has poured on the charm in his dealings with U.S. officials, trying to project an image as a rational man who is daring but moderate, a flexible leader who can see both sides to a question. He even hints that he would be willing to sit down with the Israelis—once they have shown an equal inclination to sweet reasonableness.

■ Hussein is playing a dangerous game by befriendng the PLO. Terrorist incidents on the West Bank have increased recently, and Israel has warned Jordan that it will be held accountable if it encourages the terrorists. Hussein has taken the warnings seriously, and Jordanian intelligence is monitoring the border closely to prevent a major incident that could provoke Israeli retaliation.